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Willis, Jonathan

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'Moral arithmetic' or creative accounting? (Re-)defining sin through the Ten Commandments

Jonathan Willis

Introduction

One of the most striking (and unremarked-upon) aspects of the history of the Ten Commandments during the period of the English Reformation is the sheer number and magnitude of the contradictions they embodied.[1] In this essay, I want to explore just one aspect of one those contradictions: continuity versus change in the area of moral instruction, and specifically in the construction of sin. As a simple list of ten divinely-inspired and morally-binding rules, the Ten Commandments appeared to be the very embodiment of continuity: a concise code of behaviour given by God himself, taught from the words of Holy Scripture without modification or emendation. But while the status of the Decalogue in Protestant theological and pedagogical works rested on its impeccable scriptural credentials and divinely-instituted permanence, its true utility for reformers lay in the ease with which it could be used to construct, disguise, reconfigure or deny a multiplicity of culturally contingent messages; including nothing less than the redefinition of sin itself. In 1988, John Bossy described the process by which the Ten Commandments replaced the Seven Deadly (or Capital, or Cardinal) Sins as the chief moral system taught by the Western Christian

[1] See also Jonathan Willis, 'Repurposing the Decalogue in Reformation England', in Dominik Markl (ed.), *The Decalogue and its Cultural Influence* (Sheffield, 2013), pp. 190-204; Jonathan Willis, 'The Decalogue, Patriarchy, and Domestic Religious Education in Reformation England', in John Doran and Charlotte Methuen (eds), *Religion and the Household* (*Studies in Church History* 50. Woodbridge, 2014), pp. 199-209; Jonathan Willis, *The Reformation of the Decalogue* (forthcoming).

Church as an example of 'moral arithmetic'.[2] This essay seeks to demonstrate that the shift in question was much more significant than even Bossy realised; that its primary importance was not moral, but theological; and that the Protestant reformation of the Decalogue involved some highly creative accounting.

Continuity

At first glance the commandments appear, both to us and to contemporaries, elemental, permanent, and unchanging. The Old Testament book of Exodus described in evocative and awe-inspiring terms the actual, physical descent of the God of Israel to the summit of Mount Sinai, heralded by thunder, lightning and the sound of trumpets, cloaked in fire and wreathed in clouds. There God delivered his Law to Moses; when he 'had made an end of communing with him', he gave to Moses 'two tables of testimony, tables of stone, written with the finger of God'.[3] These tables 'were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, graven upon the tables'.[4] This first set of stone tablets was in fact short lived, for when Moses descended from Sinai to find the Israelites dancing around an idol (in the form of a golden calf), his 'anger waxed hot, and he cast the tables out of his hands, and brake them beneath the mount'.[5] Moses then took the calf, burnt it in the fire, ground it into powder, mixed the powder with water, and forced the sinful multitude to drink the resulting mixture, brewed from the ashes of the offending bovine effigy.[6] In response to this act of penitence and contrition, and Moses' pleading on behalf of his people, God instructed his prophet to hew

[2] John Bossy: 'Moral arithmetic: Seven Sins into Ten Commandments', in Edmund Leites (ed.), *Conscience and Casuistry in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: CUP, 1988), pp. 214-234.

[3] Exodus 31:18. All biblical quotations are from the Authorised (King James) Version.

[4] Exodus 32:16.

[5] Exodus 32:19.

[6] Exodus 32:20.

two more stone tablets from the mountain, and descended once more onto Sinai, where he dictated the commandments once again, this time to Moses, who wrote out the Ten Commandments onto these two new 'tables of testimony'.[7]

The commandments were repeated by Moses again in Deuteronomy; but, unlike their Roman Catholic kin, it was to the Decalogue's first divine enunciation in the Book of Exodus that the Protestant divines of sixteenth-century England consistently referred.[8] Authors frequently discussed God's personal authorship of the stone tables, with his own finger, in an attempt to convey a sense of the divine weight and material permanence of the Ten Commandments. Hugh Broughton noted that 'the holy Jews did, as all men should, honour the finger of God in the two tables: wherein all wisedome of faith & manners is conteined', and William Camden explained that 'Moses received of God a literall law, written by the finger of God, in the two Tables of the ten Commandements'.[9] The Edwardian musician John Merbecke, paraphrasing Tyndale, was at pains to establish that 'the lawe of the ten commaundements was not revealed by man … but by God himself at the mount Sina, not by the hand of Moses, but with the finger of God in tables'. Forgetting perhaps that Moses had demonstrated their surprising fragility by shattering them, he explained that the commandments were 'not made of matter, easie to be dissolved, but made of stone to indure

[7] Exodus 34:1-27.

[8] Deuteronomy 5:6-21; Exodus 20:1-17. The Deuteronomical text differs slightly from that of Exodus, and better supports the Catholic numbering of the commandments, specifically the two forms of covetousness proscribed in the ninth and tenth.

[9] Hugh Broughton, *A reuelation of the holy Apocalyps* (1610), p. 174; William Camden, *Remaines of a greater worke, concerning Britaine, the inhabitants thereof, their languages, names, surnames, empreses, wise speeches, poësies, and epitaphes* (1605), p. 152.

for ever'[10]. The Elizabethan composer William Leighton expressed the same sentiment in more lyrical terms:

> These laws did'st write in tables two
> with the pure finger of thine hand:
> deliuered them Moyses unto,
> that we thy will might understand.[11]

The Ten Commandments were therefore universally seen as something permanent, unchanging, something made 'to indure for ever'.

Sixteenth-century authors were also at great pains to stress that God's Law had not, in the first instance, been given by Moses; only renewed by him. Moses' law, or at least its moral aspect as embodied in the Decalogue, was one and the same as God's eternal Law. Borrowing the image of God's finger from Exodus, and redeploying it with great effect in the context of Genesis, that most practical of divines Richard Greenham explained that 'the Commandments were but a renuing of the law of nature, for it was written in the brest of Adam by the finger of God'. [12] Likewise, Samuel Purchas explained that 'the whole Law was perfectly written in the fleshie Tables of his [Adam's] heart'.[13] It was only because, after the fall, it had become 'so blurred in our hearts' that 'it was renued by the voice and finger of God on Mount Sinai'. The other parts of the Law – the ceremonial and political ordinances – had been 'mediately given by the Ministerie of Moses, as to that particular nation' of Israel; but the Moral Law contained within the Decalogue had been given 'immediately by God

[10] John Merbecke, *A booke of notes and common places* (1581), p. 610.

[11] William Leighton, *The teares or lamentations of a sorrowfull soule* (1613), p. 28.

[12] Richard Greenham, *The workes of the reuerend and faithfull seruant af Iesus Christ M. Richard Greenham*, ed. H.H. (1612), p. 812; c.f. Kenneth Parker and Eric Carlson, *'Practical Divinity': The Works and Life of Revd Richard Greenham* (Aldershot, 1998).

[13] Samuel Purchas, *Purchas his pilgrimage* (1613), p. 16.

himselfe, as God over all'.[14] The essential unity of the moral element of the Mosaic law – the Ten Commandments – with the preceding law of nature and the subsequent law of Christ was convincingly and entertainingly demonstrated in an eccentric play by the bilious dramatist, theologian and former Carmelite John Bale. In his *nevve comedy or enterlude, concernyng thre lawes of nature, Moises, and Christe,* the law of nature was sent down to instruct mankind in true religion, but was quickly defeated by a colourful cast of anthropomorphised human sins. The Mosaic Law was then sent to earth to provide reinforcements, where he explained his role to the audience thus:

> THe lord perceivyng, his fyrst law thus corrupted
> With unclene vices, sent me his law of Moses
> To se hym for synne, substancyallye corrected
> And brought in agayne, to a trade of godlynes…[15]

'Evangelium' (or 'Christi lex'), sent down after the shackling of Moses' Law, was finally rescued by 'Vindicta Dei', the judgement of God. The three embodiments of the Law then gathered around God the Father, who addressed them each in turn. To the Decalogue, he uttered the following words:

> Thou lawe of Moses, gyve me that vayle from the
> no longer shalt thou, neyther blynde nor croked be
> Hence thou Ambycion, and cursed Couetousnes
> I here banyshthe you, from this lawe ever doubtles
> Lose not those tables, which are a token true
> That thou in the fleshe, shalt ever more continue.[16]

[14] Purchas, *Purchas his pilgrimage*, p. 17.

[15] John Bale, *A nevve comedy or enterlude, concernyng thre lawes of nature, Moises, and Christe, corrupted by the sodomytes, Pharysies, and papistes* (1562), sig. D4^{r}.

The Decalogue was therefore not only permanent, insofar as it had been written by God himself in stone, but eternal, insofar as it was a renewal of the natural law written in mankind's heart by God at Creation, and which had been renewed once more (and ultimately fulfilled) by God in human form, through the life and saving death of Christ. The moral message of the Decalogue, and the sins it proscribed, were therefore by association equally as permanent and unchanging. But was this the case in practise?

Change

The Ten Commandments as they were received, understood and expounded by English reformers and divines were also fundamentally a text: and texts, even (perhaps especially) biblical texts, had to be subject to interpretation and explanation in order to establish their true meaning for those without the appropriate theological training. At the most fundamental level, during the English reformation the Ten Commandments came to be widely understood as defining the very concept of sin. In his *briefe & necessary instruction verye needefull to bee knowen of all householders*, the puritan preacher Edward Dering asked, 'what is syn'? The answer came back: 'synne is the breach of the law of God, contained in the ten commaundements'.[17] The whole notion of what constituted sin in reformation England was therefore conditioned by the ten precepts of the moral law. The delicate Catholic framework that had been built up over centuries – of mortal and venial sins, of deadly or cardinal sins – was swept away by the Protestant reformation, on the basis that it was unscriptural. The Decalogue assumed a greater prominence for Catholics over the course of the sixteenth

[16] Bale, *A nevve comedy*, sig. K2^{v}.

[17] Edward Dering, *A briefe & necessary instruction verye needefull to bee knowen of all householders* (1572), sig. Bi^{v}. C.f. William Dyke, *A treasure of knowledge: springing from the fountaine of godlinesse, which is the word of God … Also a briefe and pithe exposition of the ten Comandements of Almightie God...* (1620), p. 19.

century too, but ultimately it remained only one of a number of available conceptual tools for exploring and cataloguing moral and sinful behaviours, sitting alongside including the Seven Sins, the Commandments of the Church, the Cardinal and Theological virtues, etc. For English Protestants, however, the Decalogue became not only the primary but effectively the *only* religious framework for moral instruction.[18] The whole category of sin was fundamentally redefined and, on the surface at least, simplified. But were the Ten Commandments up to the job? Let us briefly remind ourselves of what we are dealing with. The Ten Commandments begin with a set of religious obligations not explicitly mentioned in any of the Seven Sins.[19] We begin with the commandment 'thou shalt have no other gods before me', followed by the prohibition against graven images, the ban against blaspheming (taking the Lord's name in vain), and the injunction to 'remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy'.[20] We then move on to the realm of social interactions. There is no obvious analogue

[18] See John Bossy: 'Moral arithmetic: Seven Sins into Ten Commandments', in Edmund Leites (ed.), *Conscience and Casuistry in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: CUP, 1988), pp. 214-234; Willis, 'Repurposing the Decalogue in Reformation England', pp. 191-195.

[19] Lists of 'deadly' or 'cardinal' sins varied in the early Church, but Gregory the Great (540-604) was responsible for formulating the system which became the most influential and widespread: *Superbia* (pride), *Ira* (wrath), *Invidia* (envy), *Avaritia* (avarice), *Acedia* (sloth), *Gula* (gluttony), and *Luxuria* (lust). See Morton W. Bloomfield, *The Seven Deadly Sins* (Michigan, 1952), p. 72.

[20] This is of course according to the Reformed numbering, based on the version of the Decalogue as outlined by Origen and used by the Greek Orthodox Church. The Catholic version, based upon Augustine's numbering and retained by the Lutheran Church, includes the prohibition against the making of graven images as part of the First Commandment, and outlines two separate commandments against coveting (the ninth covering the neighbour's wife and tenth covering the neighbour's goods) to make up ten in total. The first four commandments were known as the 'first table', and outlined the duties owed by mankind to his creator (easily summarised by the instruction to 'love God'). Commandments five to ten comprised the 'second table', and explained the duties owed by man to his fellow man (in brief, 'love thy neighbour').

for the command to 'Honour thy father and thy mother' in the Seven Sins, but 'thou shalt not kill' maps quite nicely onto the sin of wrath, as does 'thou shalt not commit adultery' onto the sin of lust. 'Thou shalt not steal' does not have an exact counterpart, but it is not too much of a stretch to associate theft with the sin of avarice, and the final commandment, 'thou shalt not covet', corresponds very neatly with the sin of envy. The Ninth Commandment, against false witness, again has no obvious twin; and that still leaves three 'Cardinal Sins'– gluttony, sloth and pride – entirely unaccounted for by the Decalogue, not to mention many of the contemporary sins which early modern divines were so preoccupied with condemning, such as dicing, dancing and drunkenness. John Bossy once famously referred to the shift from the Seven Sins to the Ten Commandments as an example of 'moral arithmetic', but it should now be quite clear that in the case of the commandments it was necessary for the reformers to subject them to some quite creative accounting to render them fit for purpose. Theologically speaking the commandments were an embodiment of divine perfection: a reflection of the eternal law of God, encompassing all possible sinful behaviours, not to mention their countervailing virtues. George Estey explained that the Decalogue 'setteth downe all duties for manners of mankind'.[21] But practically speaking, the list was partial and limited, designed to reflect the needs of an ancient Jewish tribal society rather than the particular social, cultural and theological priorities of Protestant reformers in sixteenth-century England.

The brevity of the commandments was, on the one hand, a huge selling point: ten compendious divinely instated precepts that boiled down to two – love of God and neighbour – and were ultimately seen as the embodiment of the theological virtue of charity.[22] Even

[21] George Estey, *A most sweete and comfortable exposition, vpon the tenne commaundements* (1602), sigs. I6^{r-v}.

[22] Thomas Bentley, for example, explained that 'charitie' meant 'to loue God with all our hart, soule, understanding and power: and our neighbour as our selfe'. Thomas Bentley, *The monument of matrones conteining seuen seuerall lamps of virginitie, or distinct treatises* (1582), p. 238.

Calvin, not notably a fan of concision, observed that God 'had given us his lawe in so small roome, as everie man might count it upon his fingers ends, These are the ten commaundementes, in these hath God comprehended his whole wil, which is the rule of good life'.[23] But such a brief summary of the divine will inevitably required extensive explanation and explication, in order to tease out the full complexities of its meaning for the lay reader. To get the most from the Decalogue, a series of rules or principles for understanding the commandments had to be devised.[24] The puritan clergyman Robert Horn, for example, in his 1617 *Points of instruction for the ignorant* explained that, in approaching the Decalogue, it was important to consider both 'the occasion, and [the] commandements themselves', the occasion of every commandment being 'the corruption of mans nature unto the same.'[25] However, it was Richard Greenham, in his *briefe and necessary catechisme* of 1602, whose guide came closest to being the most common approach to the Ten Commandments. Greenham described the Law as the 'part of the word, that commandeth all good, and forbiddeth all evill', and identified four 'especial uses' of the commandments, as a basis for understanding them.[26]

Greenham's first 'use' explained that in every commandment where evil was forbidden the contrary good was commanded, and vice versa.[27] Gervase Babington, writing about the Second Commandment, explained that by that commandment it should be understood that 'thou shalt not worshippe mee with any devise of thine owne, contrary to my will and nature'; but God also 'implyeth he herein the affirmative, namely, thou shalt in

[23] Jean Calvin, *The sermons of M. Iohn Caluin vpon the fifth booke of Moses called Deuteronomie*, trans. Arthur Golding (1583), p. 391.

[24] For a more thorough discussion of these rules, see Willis, *Reformation of the Decalogue*, chapter 3.

[25] Robert Horne, *Points of instruction for the ignorant* (1617), sig. Avii^{r}.

[26] R. C. [Richard Greenham?], *A briefe and necessarie catechisme* (1602), sig. A3^{r}.

[27] Greenham, *A briefe and necessarie catechisme*, sig. A5^{v}.

everie respect worship me according to my will and nature'.[28] In other words, each commandment was possessed of both a positive and a negative aspect – a prescription and a prohibition – whatever the limitations or emphasis of the wording. Greenham's second 'use' established the principle that, in every commandment, many more evils were forbidden '& many more good things commanded, then in worde are expressed'.[29] For example, Edward Elton wrote that the Seventh Commandment, against adultery, should be understood as forbidding all things that had the potential to stir up the body to lust and uncleanness. This extended to:

> Any light, vain, immodest either setting out of the bodie, or carrying of the bodie in divers particulars, as namely, by riotous, lascivious, garish, disguised, and new-fangled attire, long shagge haire, by platting, curling, frizling, or powdering the haire, or by wearing false haire, painting the face, laying out the naked brests, stretching out of the necke, tinckling with the feet, and such like.[30]

Greenham's third instruction declared that 'God is a Spirit, and therefore his commaundements require a spirituall obedience'.[31] In this vein, George Chapelin enlightened the readers of his *A familiar and Christian instruction* that the Eighth Commandment, against theft, prohibited not only unlawful outward actions, but also inward desires; 'Wherefore God doth also iudge him a theife, which unlawfully desireth to have that which belongeth & appertaineth to his neighbour, although he bring not his desires to an effect, and accomplish

[28] Gervase Babington, *A very fruitful exposition of the Commandements* (1586), p. 85.

[29] Greenham, *A briefe and necessarie catechisme*, sig. A5^{v}.

[30] Edward Elton, *An exposition of the ten commandements of God* (1623), pp. 176-7

[31] Greenham, *A briefe and necessarie catechisme*, sig. A5^{v}. This basic principle had been established by Christ himself in the Sermon on the Mount; c.f. Matthew 5:21-22. See also Willis, *Reformation of the Decalogue*, chapter 3.

his covetous affection'.[32] Greenham's fourth and final rule directed that 'In every Commaundement where euill is forbidden, there the occasions of euill are also forbidden, and where good is commanded, there also the occasions of good are commanded'.[33] The metropolitan puritan minister Stephen Denison therefore described, in his explication of the Seventh Commandment, 'the causes of uncleannesse' that were

> also here forbidden, to wit, stageplayes, wanton books, the suffering of whorehouses, wanton dancing, strange attire, idlenesse, excesse in eating and drinking, wanton company, living unmarried not having the gift of continencie: and lastly, the living of man and wife apart.[34]

The examples could be multiplied endlessly: these four basic principles of interpretation were almost ubiquitous in Reformation-era discussions of the Decalogue.

The great significance and utility of the seven capital sins was that they had functioned not as a comprehensive list of all possible sinful actions, but rather as a brief but all-embracing catalogue of the principal sinful impulses; a complete anatomy of the elemental motivations which could go on to incubate birth a teeming swamp of debauched and sinful behaviours. The genius of the Protestant reformers was to take this important dimension of the medieval sins, and graft it on to the biblical framework of the Ten Commandments. The Decalogue was no longer a list of ten specific commands; it was a set of ten umbrella categories, within which dozens, scores, even hundreds of potentially sinful behaviours could be comprehended. The new moral framework of the commandments could therefore be made to function in almost identical fashion to the old system of the sins, and also in something like

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[32] George Chapelin, *A familiar and Christian instruction* (1582), p. 305.

[33] Greenham, *A briefe and necessarie catechisme*, sig. A5^{v}.

[34] Stephen Denison, *A compendious catechisme* (1621), p. 39. For a more compendious analysis of Denison, see Peter Lake, *The Boxmaker's Revenge* (Stanford, 2001), especially chapters 2 and 3.

reverse. It was possible, for example, to begin with the commandments (as with the Sins), examining your behaviour under each of the ten heads as a means of identifying specific transgressions.[35] However, instead of beginning with a general motivation that could lead to any number of specific sins, it was equally possible for an individual to begin with a specific sin, and to search their conscience for any number of occasions or motivations which could conceivably have given rise to it. The Seven Sins had represented a set of heads, or Capitals, under which an endless stream of sinful behaviours could be identified. In like manner, the Ten Commandments also came to be seen as a set of ten heads. But these were not ten categories under which could be listed a fixed or specific group of sinful behaviours. Rather, each individual had to search his own soul for potential weaknesses, by which any behaviour that could in some way act as an occasion for a breach of any commandment became *de facto* a sin.

This made sin in Reformation England a particularly subjective and individualistic construct. The meaning of each commandment depended, to a certain extent, upon whether or not you were prone to falling victim to certain 'occasions' as an inducement to committing a specific sin. Following Greenham (and others), the clergyman and scholar Thomas Gataker explained that 'the Commandements that forbid any sinne, forbid those things also that may be occasions of that sinne'.[36] There was an inevitable logic to this. If wearing your favourite

[35] Alec Ryrie has recently observed that 'repentance almost constituted the Christian life' for committed early modern Protestants, and that 'by far the most widespread method' of self-examination for sin was to use the Ten Commandments as a framework. Alec Ryrie, *Being Protestant in Reformation Britain* (Oxford, 2013), pp. 49-50, 57; see also Willis, *The Reformation of the Decalogue*, chapter 5.

[36] Thomas Gataker, *Of the nature and vse of lots a treatise historicall and theologicall* (1619), p. 195. Gataker noted that 'they inhibit not generally the use of all things to all, that any doth or may take occasions of evill by' – the commandments only 'forbid them to those to whom they are in that way dangerous', and 'not to those that may and doe use them without danger in that kinde'. For a more radical position, see George Estey, *A most*

green dress with the low-cut bodice made you lecherous, and liable to break the Seventh Commandment (which encompassed all sins of lust and sexual misdemeanour), then you should not wear that dress. For you as an individual, observation of the Seventh Commandment meant, at least in part, 'thou shalt not wear the green dress with the low-cut bodice': for you, wearing such a dress was a breach of God's law, and therefore a grievous sin. But that was no reason to ban everybody from wearing green dresses, or to label green-dress-wearing a sinful practice in and of itself. The question was no longer 'am I being sinful', but rather 'am I doing anything which might encourage me to sin, and which is therefore by association also a sin?' This entailed an extraordinary degree of self-awareness and moral relativism. In that sense, the new interpretive framework which Protestant divines were constructing around the Ten Commandments was not just simply redefining sin, but rather establishing an actively discursive framework within which concepts of sin could be constructed, modified, appropriated or rejected every time an individual reflected upon their behaviour. This was ideally supposed to be very often indeed.[37] Of four special duties identified by William Perkins in the practice of repentance, the first was 'a diligent and serious examination of the conscience by the Lawes & commaundementes of God, for all manner of sinnes, both original and actuall.' Actual sins, Perkins explained,

> shalbe found by examination to be innumerable as the haires of a mans head, & as the sands by the sea shore: if any will but search themselves a little by the ten commaundements of the Decalogue, for all their sinful thoughts, words and deeds against God and man.[38]

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sweete and comfortable exposition, vpon the tenne commaundements (1602), sig. P6^{v} (c.f. Willis, *Reformation of the Decalogue*, chapter 3).

[37] See also above, n. 33.

[38] William Perkins, *Tvvo treatises· I. Of the nature and practise of repentance. II. Of the combat of the flesh and spirit* (1593), pp. 18-19. C.f. Nehemiah Wallington, 'A Record of Gods Marcys (GL MS 2014)', in *The*

If sinful thoughts, words and deeds were themselves innumerable, then the number of potential occasions that could give rise to those thoughts, words and deeds was truly infinite.

The Suffolk minister Robert Allen's directions for applying and understanding the commandments were even more complex than Richard Greenham's. Where Greenham described four 'especial uses', Allen identified no fewer than eight 'rules' for 'the more full & thorough understanding of the Law of God'. The first four bore close relation to Greenham's. Allen's rules stated that the law was a spiritual law; that transgressions of the first table were more heinous than those of the second; that contrary sins were prohibited and good deeds commanded; and that under one thing forbidden were included 'all of the same kind, & what soever causeth or any way helpeth and furthereth the same … as coadjutors and accessaries therunto'. Allen's fifth rule explained that while the commandments were theologically and doctrinally distinct, 'yet as touching practise, they are so nearly knit together, that no one can be perfectly obeyed, unlesse all be obeyed, & one being transgressed al are transgressed'. And by the same token, it noted that the same transgressions were often forbidden by many, even by all of the commandments, 'according to the diuerse or contrary ends & purposes whereunto they do serve, & according as they are either diversly or contrarily applied.'[39] The notion that to break one commandment was to break them all had an impeccable pedigree. James 2:10 clearly stated, 'for whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all'; but it was a significant imaginative leap from the general principle that to fail in a single point of obedience was to fail utterly, to the conclusion that a particular sin was therefore liable to specifically breach a number (perhaps

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Notebooks of Nehemiah Wallington, 1618-1654: a selection, ed. David Booy (Aldershot, 2007), p. 49. For more on repentance, see Alec Ryrie, *Being Protestant in Reformation Britain* (Oxford, 2013), pp. 49-57; Willis, *Reformation of the Decalogue*, chapter 4..

[39] Robert Allen, *A treasurie of catechisme, or Christian instruction* (1600), pp. 25-27.

even all) of the commandments. While the Seven Sins had encouraged penitents to categorise their sinful behaviours under specific headings, the commandments, as expounded by the authors under discussion, encouraged individuals to construct scenarios where a single sinful action could have multiple sinful origins and, and also additional sinful consequences.

Constructing Morality

Let us move from the theory to a fuller illustration of two of the ways in which reformation-era divines fundamentally changed the meaning of the Ten Commandments: firstly by exploring the enormous scope of offences that could be comprehended under a single commandment, and secondly by identifying some of the 'promiscuous' sins; that is, sins which could be comprehended under various commandments. First of all then, the Seventh Commandment, 'thou shalt not commit adultery', was capable of being recreated in the image of a number of sinful behaviours. It was a particular favourite of many authors, as it allowed a general invective against all things fleshy, carnal and unclean. The Dorset minister Peter Barker, in his *iudicious and painfeull exposition vpon the ten Commandements*, explained that in this Commandment, God generally 'forbiddeth us to run vpon the rockes of uncleanness, & so make shipwracke of all honest behaviour, and commandeth us to kepe our selves chaste, as undefiled members of Christs body'.[40] Barker chose to structure his discussion of the commandment around the opening of Paul's enumeration of the works of the flesh in his Epistle to the Galatians, which focused especially on sins of a sexual nature.[41] Galatians 5 as a whole was about Christian liberty, and freedom from the yoke of the (Jewish) law, but the essential unity of the moral, natural, Mosaic and Christian laws (as

[40] Peter Barker, *A iudicious and painefull exposition vpon the ten Commandements* (1624), p. 259.

[41] Galatians 5:19: 'Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are *these;* Adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness…'

affirmed by all divines) enabled Barker to make use of it in his exposition of the commandments.[42] Adultery was the headline offence, Barker explained, because it was not only a sinful behaviour, but a breach of covenant and a subversion of the principles of succession and inheritance. He noted that breach of a legal covenant, in the context of a financial transaction made in early modern England, could end up with the aggrieved parties in Star Chamber; whilst the divinely-instituted covenant between man and wife was daily defiled with few or no serious consequences.[43] The second branch of the commandment identified by Barker, fornication, was also a sin, and entailed a number of constituent breaches, including sins against the sinner's own body, soul, material estate, name, credit, and posterity. The third branch of the sin of adultery, Barker explained, was uncleanness, 'which is a general word comprehending the two former sinnes and stretcheth yet further'. Under uncleanness, the commandment could be interpreted as forbidding sodomy, and also buggery with beasts, a sin described by Barker as 'so hated of God, that the innocent and harmless beast should dye as well as the party that committed the fact.'[44] Other (worse) sins of this sort Barker decided to 'purposely passe over', ostensibly because they were sins 'which nature doth abhorre and chaste eares will not willingly heare'; one also suspects that he didn't wish to give any unsavoury ideas to curious or impressionable readers.

Finally, Barker described the sin of 'wantonness'. Wanton behaviour could either be internal or external. Wantonness of the heart could masquerade as virtue, for just as the virtue of cleanliness could conceal the sin of pride, so wicked covetousness could manifest itself as simple thirst. In other words, what might appear to be honest love was very often sinful lust; 'thus the divell will not shew us sinne in its right colours, but with the spider weaves a fine

[42] Galatians 5:18: 'But if ye be led of the Spirit, ye are not under the law.'

[43] Barker, *A iudicious and painefull exposition*, p. 260.

[44] Barker, *A iudicious and painefull exposition*, p. 270.

webbe to hang the fly withal'. Outward wantonness could manifest itself either in specific parts of the body (namely the eye, ear, tongue, speech or carriage) or in the appurtenances.[45] Isaiah 3:16, which inveighed against 'the daughters of Zion' as 'haughty', 'with stretched forth necks and wanton eyes, walking and mincing as they go, and making a tinkling with their feet' was used to condemn dancers on this basis.[46] Outward wantonness could also manifest itself in apparel and strange diet, 'instruments to strike up a dance for adultery'. Clothing, Barker was at pains to make clear, was an unnatural device, a constant reminder of the shame of Adam following his transgression in the Garden of Eden; but fashion and waste had become the pride of nations. And as for diet, 'gluttony and drunkenness lead the dance, chambering and wantones follow forthwith': paraphrasing Ezekiel 16:49, Barker claimed that it was 'fulnesse of bread' that had 'bredde uncleanness in the Sodomites'.[47] To recap, gluttony (one of the original Seven Sins) was now a sin because food was a form of bodily appurtenance that gave rise to outward wantonness, which was itself comprehended under the Seventh Commandment, 'thou shalt not commit adultery'. Not only that, but the ancient sin of gluttony was given joint billing with a very contemporary sin, concerning elaborate clothing and sumptuary excess. In this way, authors could use historic biblical indictments to pursue a very early modern moral agenda, constructing an ethical framework based on a reading of the Ten Commandments that was both deeply traditional and strikingly innovative.

For our second example of this tendency towards the exponential multiplication of offences under each commandment, we will take the exposition of the First Commandment by the Hampshire minister Osmund Lake. Although the text of the commandment itself was quite explicit in commanding the believer to have 'no other gods before me', Lake explained

[45] Barker, *A iudicious and painefull exposition*, p. 271.

[46] Barker, *A iudicious and painefull exposition*, p. 273.

[47] Barker, *A iudicious and painefull exposition*, p. 274 [mistakenly paginated as 272].

that to have other gods 'lieth either in choice of things accepted for Gods; or in demeanure to the true God'.[48] Just as performing true service to the almighty was 'an holding of him to be his God', acting in a contrary demeanour was 'a shutting of him off to be his God, who so neglecteth him'. Such a contrary demeanour could be exhibited by omitting any virtues enjoined by the commandment, or by committing any of the contrary vices. By omission, the commandment could be broken 'when I neither learne to know him, and so am ignorant; nor seeke to worship him, and so am godlesse; neither acknowledging nor embracing him, neither by faith, nor by the fruits of it; neither thanking, loving, fearing, trusting nor calling upon him'.[49] Not exhibiting suitable fear of God, therefore, was in this framework given an effective moral equivalence to worshipping a strange god, or no god at all. 'In a word', Lake explained, 'whatsoever either evill is done or forborne without thinking upon God: or good is performed without assurance to God's good will and pleasure for it: it maketh proofe of the want of this feare'.[50] Trust of God was omitted when man put trust in anything other than God himself. This included those who resorted to 'Magicke or Soothsaying, if sicknesse or losse do annoy them', as well as those 'seeking to the physition … meane while forgetting as well the true cause, both meritorie, which is their sinne, and efficent principall which is their God'.[51] Committing a sin without fear, doing good without thinking of God, putting trust in magic or in medicine; these were no better than worshipping Zeus or Diana, converting to Judaism, or professing atheism.

[48] Osmund Lakes, *A probe theologicall: or, The first part of the Christian pastors proofe of his learned parishioners faith. Wherein is handled, the doctrine of the law for the knowledge of it, with such profitable questions, as aptly fall in at euery branch of the Law* (1612), p. 15.

[49] Lakes, *A probe theologicall*, p. 15.

[50] Lakes, *A probe theologicall*, p. 16.

[51] Lakes, *A probe theologicall*, p. 17.

Lastly, let me turn to what I termed 'promiscuous sins' – that is, not sins relating to promiscuity, but sins which had a habit of popping up under the guise of various commandments. In his *guide unto godlinesse* of 1617, republished the following year as *A Plaine and familiar explanation of the tenne commandments*, Francis Bunny, the younger brother of Edmund and a formidable theologian in his own right, explained that the Ninth Commandment 'teacheth us not to speake any thing whereby our neighbour may be wronged.'[52] Wronging a neighbour by means of false speech as a witness, however, was perjury, and because it involved taking the Lord's name in vain such false speech also counted as a breach of the Third Commandment.[53] Through committing perjury, it was also possible for the sinner to 'steale away their neighbours maintenance of his life, and so offend against the Sixt and Eighth Commandement' – the sixth because of the harm to life, and the eighth due to the act of stealing. Such a one 'may iustly be hated of God and man'.[54] Perhaps the best example of this sort of moral promiscuity is to be found in an extract from an epigraph 'Against Dancing', printed in Jean-Paul Perrin's *bloudy rage of that great antechrist of Rome* and *Luther's forerunners*, both published in English in 1624; the same extract was subsequently reproduced by Prynne in *Histrio-mastix* in 1633, and then again in Penn's 1669 *No Cross, no crown*. Here the author described in detail how, by dancing on the Sabbath, man could break all Ten Commandments. In dancing, man serves himself and therefore makes of himself a god (1); he makes an idol of the thing (dancing) that he loves (2); oaths are frequent amongst dancers and the Lord's name is therefore taken in vain (3); dancing of course profanes the Sabbath (4); parents are dishonoured when marriage bargains between dancers

[52] Francis Bunny, *A guide vnto godlinesse: or, A plaine and familiar explanation ofr the ten commandements, by questions and answeres fittest for the instruction of the simple and ignorant people* (1617), p. 212.

[53] Bunny, *A guide vnto godlinesse*, p. 215.

[54] Bunny, *A guide vnto godlinesse*, p. 216.

are made without their counsel (5); he who dances kills the souls of others by persuading them to commit lust (6); by lusting he himself commits adultery (7); he steals the hearts of others away from God (8); dancers speak falsely against the truth to pursue their sinful desires (9); and they covet women and their ornaments (10).[55] Such an analysis was not unique, but it is still undeniably extraordinary.[56] The theological distance travelled between the text of the Decalogue and this analysis of dancing, cited approvingly by numerous reformers, was astonishing: evidence of the mental agility with which Protestant divines enthusiastically (re-)constructed the moral landscape of Reformation England.

Conclusion

Constituting a practical guide for the identification and avoidance of sinful behaviours was therefore only one small aspect of the Decalogue's broader significance in Reformation England. However, in this short essay I hope I have given a sense of how crucial the commandments, and more especially their numerous expositions, were in conditioning the religious and moral landscape of reformation England. To this day, the Decalogue retains a great deal of weight and relevance – it resonates powerfully with our conception of what constitutes acceptable, moral behaviour. And yet the Decalogue ever was (and is) a product of the time during which, and the society by which, it was espoused. While the basic framework – the text itself – was constant and immutable, religious authors and reformation-

[55] J. P. Perrin, *The bloudy rage of that great antechrist of Rome and his superstitious adherents, against the true church of Christ and the faithfull professors of his gospell. Declared at large in the historie of the Waldenses and Albigenses*, trans. Samson Lennard (1624), pp. 65-6.

[56] C.f. Daniel Dyke, *Tvvo treatises. The one, of repentance, the other, of Christs temptations* (1616), p. 246; Robert Parker, *A scholasticall discourse against symbolizing with Antichrist in ceremonies: especially in the signe of the crosse* (1607), sigs. Cc^{r}-Dd^{v}; Francis Johnson, *An advertisement concerning a book lately published by Christopher Lawne and others* (1612), p. 10; Gataker, *Of the nature and vse of lots*, p. 194.

era divines were able to build upon it an intricate and complex edifice, comprising endless shifting layers of meaning. Indeed, such was the power of this subjectivism and moral relativism that each individual believer was given the power to reshape the Decalogue themselves, each time they used it as a mechanism for identifying and contemplating their own personal sinful acts. In doing so, reformation England constructed for itself a fluid, adaptive and strikingly innovative moral framework, effectively rewriting the Ten Commandments, and redefining the concept of sin in the process.